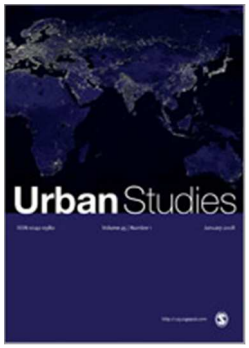

THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF POLITICAL CONTESTATION IN TIMES OF 'URBAN AUSTERITY'

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THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF POLITICAL CONTESTATION IN TIMES OF 'URBAN AUSTERITY'

Abstract

This paper seeks to provide a conceptual framework in which to examine the social practices of contemporary austerity programmes in urban areas, including how these relate to different conceptions of crisis. Of current theoretical interest is the apparent ease with which these austerity measures have been accepted by urban governing agents. In order to advance these understandings we follow the recent post-structuralist discourse theory 'logics' approach of Glynos and Howarth (2007), focusing on the relationship between hegemony, political and social logics, and the subject whose identificatory practices are key to understanding the form, nature and stability of discursive settlements. In such thinking it is not only the formation of discourses and the mobilisation of rhetoric that are of interest, but also the manner in which the subjects of austerity identify with these. Through such an approach we examine the case of the regeneration/economic development and planning policy area in the city government of Birmingham (UK). In conclusion, we argue that the logics approach is a useful framework through which to examine how austerity has been uncontested in a city government, and the dynamics of acquiescence in relation to broader hegemonic discursive formations.

Keywords: urban, austerity, hegemony, logics, fantasy

INTRODUCTION

There have been various approaches taken to understanding economic, political and social urban crisis. In certain accounts urban areas are interwoven with the inherent tensions, contradictions and 'material' crisis tendencies of the capital accumulation process (Cockburn, 1977). The urban is a site for capital to invest in the built environment in response to over-accumulation, but which compounds crisis tendencies (Harvey, 1985). This is more recently manifest in the urban as a causal element of the financial crisis, as well as a site at which the impacts of poverty and property abandonment play out (Donald et al, 2014). Alternative accounts, such as Jones and Ward (2002), argue that neoliberalised economic crisis tendencies have been displaced to the 'political', with the state having responsibility for addressing crisis, the failure of which leads to further crisis and 'crisis management' interventions. Clarke and Newman (2012) argue that such processes have occurred through the discursive switch from financial crisis to a crisis of sovereign state debt. In other accounts, such as Fuller (2010) and Boin et al (2009), crisis is viewed as a discursive strategy, enacted through 'crisis talk', deployed by particular actors as a means with which to influence and control. Such thinking also extends to those accounts which view crisis as an 'opportunity' for societal and governing change (e.g. Harvey, 2009; Holgersen, 2014). While such accounts deepen the analysis of crisis they do not place the construction of discourses and mobilisation of rhetoric that is intertwined with crisis tendencies, and which relates to the subject, at the forefront of their analysis. This suggests the need for greater conceptual sensitivity towards such practices in the rolling-out of urban austerity.

In many Western countries we are presently witnessing considerable cuts in expenditure for public services as a consequence of austerity programmes, leading to the restructuring and

sometime reduction of the state in substantial ways (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011). Integral to such processes is the role of discursively framed practices of austerity producing 'actually existing' crisis tendencies (Streeck and Schafer, 2013). Various commentators argue that these processes represent the continuation of neoliberal tendencies (e.g. Aalbers, 2013; Peck, 2013; McBride and Merolli, 2013). Importantly, while such processes derive largely from central government-led legislation, the actual detail of how these processes will be implemented has been devolved to subnational sites (Peak, 2012). Urban areas are also key sites of pro-active neoliberal experimentation and innovation (Oosterlynck and Gonzalez, 2013). For Peck (2012), such occurrences are key elements of a contemporary age of 'austerity urbanism', characterised by 'a new operational matrix for urban politics' (632).

Rather than conceive of neo-liberalism as an accomplished entity, we follow Peck et al (2013) in positing neoliberalism as partly an incomplete process of discursive formation, 'connected to a more deeply rooted and creatively destructive process of diachronic transformation', which is changing urban areas and their governance (1092). This paper seeks to advance such a perspective by drawing attention to the role of political rhetoric and subjectivity in austerity programmes in urban areas. In so doing, we draw on a strand of third generation post-structuralism (Howarth, 2013), which extends Laclau's (1990; and Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) theory of hegemony by taking greater account of, what might be loosely labelled, its affective dimension. Our contention is that while the years immediately following the financial crisis witnessed elements of counter-hegemonic fervour, particularly focused in and around the Occupy movements, the politics of austerity have largely been legitimised and accepted, albeit in disparate ways (see Blyth, 2013). For some, of course, this might be taken as a sign of the failure of the theory of hegemony (see, for example, Lash, 2007), but the argument we advance here is that there is merit in seeking an explanation for

the acceptance of urban austerity *within* hegemony theory (Stavrakakis, 2014), and its particular understanding of the complex interactions of political tactics and rhetoric, on the one hand, and the crucial role of subjectivity in the maintenance or overturning of social orders, on the other (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Howarth, 2013).

In the next section we move on to examine approaches to urban austerity, before critically engaging key concepts within recent extensions of the post-structuralist theory of discourse and hegemony, and then illustrating our argument through the examination of urban regeneration/economic development programmes in Birmingham (UK). We explicitly focus on the regeneration/economic development and planning service of Birmingham City Council as a long term civic leader in this area of activity, and one that has been subject to considerable austerity measures in recent years. This involves both a discourse analysis of relevant policy documents, political speeches and public debates (e.g. media), as well as interviews with key stakeholders within the City Council. Regarding the latter, given our express concern with political rhetoric and the affective in negotiating austerity within the council in an everyday manner, interviews are limited to senior managers and officers, of which fifteen were undertaken in the economic development, regeneration and planning policy area. We are therefore expressly concerned with austerity measures taking place within the Council, rather than how they are being mediated through broader urban governance arrangements, or questions relating to the acquiescence and contestation of austerity by society.

The 'logics' approach of Glynos and Howarth (2007) implies a discourse analysis focused on practices, as discursive constructs, produced and governed by the incompleteness of social structures. As 'logics' enact or contest governing 'regimes of practices' that fulfil the above,

the empirical concern is with discursively examining the construction and enactment of logics as social constructs and, as such, their 'problematization', following Foucault, as we go about examining their operation (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The paper is explicitly concerned with political and fantasmatic logics. This means identifying how political logics (of austerity) have emerged and where tactics and strategies seek to articulate conformity or contest of austerity through logics of 'equivalence' and 'difference'. For fantasmatic logics the empirical analysis is geared towards understanding 'how' and 'why' subjects are 'gripped' by political logics of austerity, with a key route of analysis being semi-structured interviews.

The discourses of UK governments, with their Parliamentary legislative basis, are problematized as austerity political logics (during the 2010-15 period), with the paper concerned with concurrent political and fantasmatic logics at the Council, which either adhere, distort or contest austerity measures deriving from central government. Building upon previous studies, the discourse analysis focuses on austerity activities relating to budget and service reductions, restructuring of services (e.g. amalgamation), and efficiency drives (e.g. renegotiating outsourcing contracts) (see Lobao and Adua, 2011; Warner and Clifton, 2013; Donald et al, 2014; Meegan et al, 2014). The discourse analysis comprises examination of Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) reports, and speeches by relevant central government Cabinet politicians that are directly concerned with austerity. Council reports from 2010 until 2015 were also examined, focusing primarily on annual budget consultation documents; minutes of Cabinet meetings; speeches made by the Leader, Deputy Leader and opposition leaders; and final budget statements. This includes a total of 70 documents, supported by the examination of Birmingham-based media reports from 2010 until 2015 that directly relate to austerity, producing a database of 32 articles on

austerity. This material and the semi-structured interviews were subsequently examined in NVivo, and form the basis of the empirical analysis.

AUSTERITY URBANISM

For Blyth (2013) and Boin et al (2009), the financial crisis has been utilised by particular actors to push through (historically configured) ideologically-based cuts to the size of the state, marginalising deliberative practices and discursive constructions of alternative governing values and practices. For Peck (2012) the manifestation of these processes occurs through 'austerity urbanism', encompassing three processes that are interwoven with neoliberal tendencies. Firstly, there is 'destructive creativity' in which already existing neoliberalised state apparatus and responsibilities, as well as those 'roll-out' initiatives designed to ameliorate the worst excesses and crisis tendencies of the former, are scaled back. Secondly, there is 'deficit politics' in which budget restraints are legitimated in electoral politics, making resistance far harder and increasing contestation over limited resources. Finally, 'devolved risk' encompasses nation states' decentralising the implementation and management of austerity to subnational authorities, but where the latter has little influence on the extent of austerity. Such processes are not spatially uniform as subnational spaces have different institutional arrangements, capabilities and resources in which to mediate austerity measures (Lobao and Adua, 2011). The role of urban crisis tendencies is implicit within this categorisation. Following Jones and Ward (2002), the overall recognition is one in which urban governing agents are mediating the 'economic' crisis tendencies (arising from but also causing the financial crisis) that have been internalised by the nation state, resulting in processes such as devolved risk. 'Crisis talk' is more likely to be a critical element of the

politics of austerity characterising processes of destructive creativity and deficit politics that is endogenous to the urban (e.g. Schipper, 2013).

Yet while Peck (2012) identifies important governing tendencies, and related crisis forms, there is the potential to enhance this framework. Firstly, many 'austerity urbanism' accounts do not explicitly conceptualise why substantial, collective resistance to austerity is lacking. This is critical given that the realisation of austerity and continuation of neoliberal tendencies relies upon such conditions of passivity (see, for example, Donald et al 2014; Harvey, 2005), in which material urban crisis tendencies are accepted/uncontested and mitigated within urban spaces. The absence of 'major' organised resistance to inequalities or austerity programmes more recently is merely further evidence of this (Worth, 2013). The basis of many accounts of austerity programmes is that they acquire their hegemonic status through the neoliberal tendencies embedded in institutionalised values and norms, and a pro-market ideological stance. In doing so they downplay how they have to be continually performed in order to obtain such status (Newman, 2013). This relates to the broader issue that certain 'neoliberalism' accounts tend to disregard the role of politics and the 'subject', and thus alternative values, motives, strategies and practices (see Ferguson, 2009).

Secondly, and building on the above, while 'austerity urbanism' represents a powerful heuristic tool it has largely been developed in regards to the USA where, as recognised by Peck (2012), 'austerity' has long been normalised (see Davidson and Ward, 2014). In contrast, countries such as the UK and Germany (Barbehön and Münch, 2015) have exhibited both pro-market neoliberal values and material arrangements, and quasi-Keynesian tendencies such as New Labour's 'Working Tax Credits' (Fuller and Geddes, 2008). This suggests the need to work at higher levels of abstraction when analysing the frameworks in

which austerity and neoliberal tendencies occur and persist, but, at the same time, allowing for the examination of local variability. Brenner et al (2010) and Peck (2013) seek a framework that is sensitive to the spatially 'variegated', uneven and incomplete nature of neoliberalism. Such processes translate into uneven and variable responses to austerity across space, as these are mediated by political, social and economic conditions and actors within these spaces, such as the impact of historically constituted political relations (Peck, 2012). For Oosterlynck and Gonzalez (2013), Brenner et al's (2010) approach is restrictive in the sense that it based on a belief that 'global forces are imposed into a variety of resisting local situations' (1076). Oosterlynck and Gonzalez (2013) utilise 'cultural political economy' as a mechanism for understanding the spatial differentiation of neoliberal and inherited tendencies. Yet such an approach, while mindful of the tenuous nature of the relationship between cultural construal and social construction (Jessop, 2009), tends to presume a more or less rational correspondence between material possibilities and the hegemonic social order. What are potentially missed, thereby, are the ways in which 'business as usual' approaches can persist in spite of empirically manifest failures (Glynos et al, 2014) and, moreover, the ways in which practical policy failures can serve to bolster ideological success (Stavrakakis, 2007).

Thirdly, and leading on from the above, recent studies of austerity such as Peck (2012), Meegan et al (2014) and Donald et al (2014), provide thoughtful insights into different types of austerity and the persistence of neoliberal tendencies. However, more attention to 'why' and 'how' austerity tendencies are constructed and enacted through political practices, including the central issue of how they are accepted and legitimised, would enhance this approach, including how they relate to the subject. For instance, Davidson and Ward (2014) present a comprehensive picture of austerity in Californian cities, highlighting the important

role of 'political decision making that requires them to identify winners and losers' in terms of creditors (pension recipients) and services (93). Yet a conceptualisation of how such decisions are constructed and accepted in relation to broader discursive regimes would enrich such accounts. Similarly, extensive frameworks involving different tendencies are presented by Peck (2012), Schipper, (2013) and Warner and Clifton (2013). But, these accounts tend to gloss over the question of why and how this normalisation is constantly performed (or contested in particular episodes) through political practices, and in relation to broader social relations, and the relationship to the subject in such processes. Critical to addressing these issues is a greater appreciation of 'the political' as the (potential) moment of subjectivity and the institution of (new) social orders (Laclau, 1990). For this we turn to the work of various third generation theorists working within the post-structuralist discourse theoretic tradition.

HEGEMONY AND LOGICS

Of central importance to the post-structuralist theory of hegemony is the possibility that objective crises, or crisis tendencies, hold for political and social renewal. Crises are dislocatory moments which reveal the ontological incompleteness of social formations and in which subjects are literally 'forced' to act and identify anew' (Howarth, 2005: 323). They may give rise to antagonisms and the articulation of new political demands into discursive formations capable of supporting new identificatory possibilities and social practices (Howarth, 2013). But, that crises or 'crisis talk' (Fuller, 2010) will give rise to new social orders is far from obvious. Political tactics for thwarting antagonism and preventing the articulation of demands and grievances into new discursive chains, capable of challenging the prevailing social order, may be mobilised. These political 'logics of difference' (Glynos and

Howarth, 2007; Howarth, 2013) concern 'the way(s) in which claims and demands are managed by authorities and power-holders in ways that do not disturb or modify a dominant practice or regime in a fundamental way' (Howarth, 2013, 203). Examples here might include the kind of tactics of democratisation, moralisation and individualisation deployed by the political elite for 'managing' the Occupy movement, as identified by Dean (2011).

Further, and building on the Lacanian foundations of the theory of hegemony and the concepts of the lacking subject and 'the Real', third generation theorists have also begun to emphasise more forcefully than hitherto the importance of the form and force of 'discursive formations' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) in securing the consent of subjects in ways that do not involve the perpetual invocation of governmental power (Howarth, 2013). Here discourses take on a *fantasmatic* logic, both foretelling of disaster and guaranteeing future harmony, demonising certain groups and practices and approving of others (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The function of a fantasy is to smooth over the experience of dislocation (the Real/impossible), converting the impossibility of symbolic and imaginary fullness into mere difficulty (Glynos, 2008). Fantasies offer subjects a certain *enjoyment* 'from their identifications with certain signifiers and figures' and their exclusion of others (Howarth, 2013: 204). The obvious figures of 'benefit scrounger' 'illegal immigrant' or 'greedy banker' (Chang and Glynos, 2011), for example, appear within this fantasmatic matrix, but so too do more complex ideas like 'hating big government' (Glynos, 2014) or 'the personalisation of public services' (West, 2013). These signifying elements are often merely implicit; not formally part of public official discourse (ibid), but nonetheless, or even because of their unofficial character, partially enjoyed.

These questions of power and consent have, of course, been at the core of many accounts of austerity and neoliberalism as they seek to explain their persistence, but these tend to emphasise the role of values, beliefs and dogma that inform a 'common sense', guiding politicians and policy makers (e.g. Blyth, 2013; Callinicos, 2012). In such conceptions there is the danger that human agency is simply guided by a broader common sense, while in accounts more sensitive to the role of 'creative' human agency there is little conceptualisation of the relationship between the subject and broader discursive formations. What is important to note in this recent iteration of the theory of hegemony is that identification with fantasy is not merely a pathology of the misguided or duped, as with other theories of interpellation, but rather a necessary element of social being (Fink, 1997). Theorists do, though, (variously) point to the possibility of loosening fantasmatic attachments (Stavrakakis, 2007) and, indeed, the contribution of critical analysis is in naming such fantasies and fantasmatic attachments as such and, thereby, reducing their power to affect (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Howarth, 2013).

Alongside these theoretical amplifications of the theory of hegemony, attention has also turned to methodological questions. Glynos and Howarth's (2007), so-called, logics approach is an effort to render the theory more applicable to empirical enquiry and explanation. The approach posits three logics – social, political and fantasmatic. *Social logics* refer to the purpose and form, or 'what', of the taken-for-granted norms and organising principles underpinning a set of meaningful practices and discourses; *political logics* refer to the ways in which new demands arise and come to be discursively articulated (logics of equivalence) and to the tactics and strategies for preventing the articulation of new demands (logics of difference) that we have already discussed. Such political logics underpin the forms of resistance enacted by actors through political rhetoric and discourses. *Fantasmatic logics*

refer to the ways in which social and political logics are constructed to secure identification and to embed them sufficiently in the social imaginary as to obviate the need for the formal exercise of power. Together, then, '[t]hese logics offer a language with which to characterize and critically explain the dialectical movement governing practice, including the way they come to be instituted, maintained, defended and transformed. Logics articulate something about the norms, roles and narratives, as well as the ontological presuppositions that, together, render practices possible, intelligible and vulnerable to contestation.' (Glynos et al, 2015, 3). As such it is a language that can be articulated with other concepts and explanatory elements in the production of critical explanations which move in a retroductive manner between specific empirical phenomena and theorisation (Glynos and Howarth, 2007).

The logics approach, then, opens up a way of understanding how discourses can have what Glynos (2014) terms 'an epistemological function', 'linking the subject to a shared universe of meaning' *and* a psychic function, acting to 'keep the anxiety associated with the radical contingency of social relations at bay' (5). Practices associated with austerity, for example, are not just discursively packaged as 'measures for dealing with crisis', but also as discursive elements that explain why we cannot attain satisfaction within the current neo-liberal economic order, but nonetheless continue to desire it. It is with these logics in mind that the next section explores their critical role in underpinning certain discursive framings of crisis. In this, we remain very much within the confines of discourse analysis, not psycho-analysis, but, to the extent that this approach tunes into the power of certain discursive forms to affect (or grip), it enables us to foreground subjectivity in explaining the interplay of resistance and acquiescence in urban austerity.

Finally, logics, as political practices and fantasmatic tendencies, work through and constitute particular socio-spatial relations in ways that are comparable to Lefebvre's (1991) understandings of 'perceived', 'conceived' and 'lived' triad spaces, which work through disparate geographical relations. As expressed by Jessop and Jones (2011), social and political practices are imbricated with the socio-spatial relations of territories, place, scale and networks. Logics thus come to represent, causally impact upon and are interwoven with particular political strategies, and fantasmatic everyday lived experiences, through disparate socio-spatial relations (Jessop et al, 2008). Here, we can follow the thinking of MacKinnon (2011) in understanding the imbrication of political aims, values and strategies with scale, but recognise that the former often works through other geographical relations, such as the co-configuration of territories and networks (Painter, 2010). Building upon Jessop and Jones (2011), we must however recognise the (in)compossibility of socio-spatial relations, so that such configurations are dependent on their empirical manifestation, rather than be treated as a given. The socio-spatial relations of logics is therefore a central question in understanding their empirical realisation and configuration.

THE 'LOGICS' OF AUSTERITY URBANISM

Characteristic of the post-2008 political economy is the invocation of crisis. From a Marxist critical perspective, crisis is the frame through which efforts to contain the contradictions of capitalism are understood (Harvey, 1985). Within the hegemonic neo-liberal order, however, 'crisis talk' can be seen as a particular political logic which serves to decontest or marginalise (Glynos *et al*, 2014) a social logic of social justice, which has perpetually hovered in public discourse and which always threatens to overturn the roll out of austerity. This counter social

logic of social justice is embodied in a variety of disparate intellectual critiques, for example, Dorling's 1% (2014), as well as popular movements such as the Occupy movement, periodic anti-cuts demonstrations and the cost of living crisis latterly invoked by the opposition Labour party. At the level of political logic, then, crisis talk marginalises the counter austerity social logic of social justice, pitting ideologues against pragmatists, utopia versus reality, the grown up custodians of the macro economy versus the children of populist impulse.

Here the language of 'hard choices' and 'difficult decisions' is mobilised, which implicitly contrasts with 'soft options' and the kind of 'populist pandering', which not only caused the current crisis, but which threatens to worsen it. In return for the suffering that inevitably accompanies austerity, comes a paternalistic promise of a brighter economic future. These discursive elements have been manifest in the discourses of the UK Coalition Government since 2010. For example, an early speech by David Cameron in which he poses the question: "Why is our economy broken? …because government got too big, did too much and doubled the national debt" (Cameron, 2009). More recently, Cameron (2014) has equated 'permanent austerity' with improved living standards, as keeping the "costs of living down" was to take "difficult decisions on public spending" that leaves "a state we can afford". Furthermore, the UK Chancellor asserted in 2011: "We will stick to the deficit reduction plan we have set out. It is the rock of stability on which our economy is built" (Osborne, 2011).

Drawing on Glynos and Howarth (2007), here we can see how political tactics of marginalisation draw on fantasmatic elements: an irresponsible and profligate other who stole our prosperous economy; a horrific threat of worse disaster to come if the wrong macro-economic approach is taken; but with the beatific promise of a brighter and more prosperous

future waiting at the end of the path of austerity. These discursive practices are not merely linguistic, but are also enacted in the material practices of austerity, which are most evident in the urban sphere. As the state is progressively removed from social life in a number of areas (e.g. elderly day centres,) and as the taxing scope of urban councils are constrained, partly by the failure of austerity itself, so social justice critiques mount, invoking more crisis talk and austerity performance. Thus, neoliberal tendencies characterising the social logic of austerity potentially takes us down a path of 'zombie neoliberalism', where no major alternatives come to the fore despite the loss of ideological hegemony (Peck, 2010). This has occurred through a fantasmatically-bolstered political logic of crisis talk, mobilised by 'the right' to pre-empt further crisis and restore neoliberal tendencies, which both enact and legitimise austerity (Blyth, 2013).

At the level of the urban, what has been striking about the post-2008 landscape is the way in which the macro-economic justifications of austerity have largely been uncontested by urban leaders (see Knight, 2012). That is not, however, to suggest that there is some kind of necessary or inevitable transmission of political- cum- fantasmatic marco-economic discourse from the nation state to the urban. Rather, we argue, it is the case that macro-economic discourse gets articulated with, and embedded in, local discourses. More specifically, we suggest, the adoption of macro-economic inevitabilities is itself a kind of political logic, which draws upon and reinforces fantasmatic elements. To do justice to such an assertion, clearly requires comparative analysis. It is beyond the scope of this paper to do that. Instead we illustrate this macro-urban process of discursive translation in the case of Birmingham, England's second largest city, and through the analysis of the regeneration/economic development policy area.

The case of Birmingham

Birmingham is a post-industrial and diverse city, with a population of 1,085,400, of which 42% are non-white. Deprivation is considerable, with 40% of people living in areas that are in the most deprived 10% of local authority areas in England, but at the same time Birmingham city centre is undergoing economic growth and investment, such as the redevelopment of the main train station (BCC, 2010). Birmingham City Council is presently experiencing a £600m budget reduction up to 2017, from a budget of £1,035.488m in 2013-14. This is characterised by significant (voluntary and compulsory) redundancies, with the total number of employees falling from 20k in 2010 to 12,400 in 2015, and with a further 1,200 planned in 2016-17 (BCC, 2015). The most significant 'relative' reductions are in discretionary services, including regeneration and community support, and back office personnel across all services (see BCC, 2012; BCC, 2015). The mandatory services of adult and children's social care, which constitute the vast majority of annual budgets, have experienced reductions and efficiency drives (e.g. integration of various teams), but in relative terms these have been less detrimental than for discretionary services which have far smaller budgets (see BCC, 2012; BCC, 2015).

These austerity measures have a considerable impact on regeneration/economic development efforts at the Council, as well as this service area being deeply imbricated in the broader politics and organisational processes of the authority. The Council is presently run and dominated by a Labour Party administration, holding 65% of the seats (as of 2015), while the Conservative Party possess a quarter of Council seats. As with all city authorities, this is a political administration with in-fighting and factions, which has intensified with a number of recent political scandals, including the 'Trojan Horse' episode and losing a court case on equal-pay, as well as the considerable austerity programme that will substantially change the

role of the Council. One service area where austerity is notable is 'economic development and regeneration', largely because of its discretionary rather than statutory funding status, and 'planning' which is statutory but where austerity measures have been implemented (see, for example, BCC, 2012, 2015).

Rather than completely blaming central government for austerity, what we see are logics at the Council attaching blame to a 'global' 'other', working through global networked relations, which incorporates the discourses of the previous nation state Coalition Government: "Like the upheavals in the world economy, these challenges were not made in Birmingham but we have no choice but to meet them head on" (BCC, 2013). Coupled with this fatalism, and the posited futility of austerity resistance, is a beatific fantasy in which austerity is presented as the harbinger of Birmingham's economic recovery, concealing how austerity negatively impacts upon urban economies and societies. This is epitomised by the previous Leader of Birmingham City Council who has moved beyond references to service cuts and deprivation, which are framed in terms of the 'scalar' governance and 'place' of Birmingham, to emphasise the economic objectives of 'recaptur[ing] our reputation as a global centre for skills and advanced manufacturing', again calling forth and articulating a relational global space (BCC, 2014).

This uncritical stance towards austerity is accompanied by fantasmatic logics that emphasis the ability of the City to mediate austerity, enunciating the role of 'place' as part of these logics, and which can have a role in a global world. The position of the Council has been one in which austerity, poverty and welfare dependency can be reconciled through fostering economic growth and job creation. A critical element of this has been a narrative of the industrial heritage of the city, its ability to survive and prosper through the years (senior

management interview), which is evident in many recent speeches by the previous Leader of the council: 'The opportunities arise from our history of manufacturing and skilled labour' (BCC, 2015: 12). Such views have been reinforced and stabilised by opposition parties such as the local Conservative Party leader, who has criticised the lack of transformation at the Council and strategic direction, rather than the austerity taking place (Elkes, 2015).

Logics of strategic thinking and self-sustainability

This recasting of austerity as virtue has been critical in the area of economic development, planning and regeneration, with senior managers acting as important agents articulating new strategic logics through different socio-spatial relations. Austerity is being framed in beatific forms by senior managers, as an opportunity in which to work in a more efficient manner through new scalar arrangements. This is not to suggest they are simply pro-austerity actors enacting bureaucratic forms of control, as this still leaves us with an absence of 'why' particular actions come about beyond a Weberian explanation of organisational control. They are themselves imbricated in the very fantasmatic logics that are being conveyed, as part of the 'epistemological function' of discourses that seek to dispel the anxiety of radical contingency (see West, 2013 and Glynos et al, 2014). This is epitomised, for example, in the 'end of local government' discourse that has pervaded senior political and management thinking at the Council (see Elkes, 2015).

The austerity measures have involved a reduction in staffing, through (voluntary and compulsory) redundancies in the Planning and Regeneration service, with the most comprehensive reduction occurring in 2010/11 when there was a 40% cut in the budget, representing a reduction of one-third of workers, and with a further c.35% planned up to 2015-16 (senior management interview). This restructuring, which involved combining

regeneration and planning services, was intended to reduce annual costs by £3.15m (BCC, 2012). The Planning and Regeneration service is now significantly smaller and working through multi-disciplinary geographically-focused teams, encompassing urban design, planning and regeneration officers, and with an annual expenditure budget between 2014/15-15/16 of c.£25m (BCC, 2015). This includes teams for the City centre where 'high profile' growth is concentrated, and East and Northwest where deprivation is extensive.

The smaller scale approach is justified as being more sensitive to complex issues within local 'places', and thus more efficient (BCC, 2012; Birmingham Post, 2014). This is notable in the kinds of discourses that have been projected by politicians to citizens through the media: "Austerity cuts have forced Birmingham to work smarter in the hunt for inward investment" (Birmingham Post, 2014). The Council's political leadership has also echoed the national Coalition government's oft-repeated assertion that economic growth is nothing more than 'the collective result of individual effort and aspiration, the ideas you have, the businesses you start, the hours you put in" (Cameron, 2012). This is particularly manifest in the Council articulating austerity with greater freedoms and opportunities for communities who have not previously been permitted such chances, and which equates communities with place: "There is a wealth of existing community activity in Birmingham…. and a lot of pent-up enthusiasm in our communities…. Many people want to take more control of their local neighbourhood…" (Tyler, 2013).

In this process new business models were reasoned in beatific forms, as ways in which to develop targeted interventions that produce scalar joined-up working between different disciplines working towards place-specific issues, something which was argued as lacking previously. But not everyone is completely interpolated by such beatific logics, which derive

from market-based 'project' management models (see Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006) and the framing of 'place' as an individual social unit. Many lower ranking officers take the view that this course of action was the only option to ensure the continuation of the service, and reasoned that it provided the legitimacy for major job losses and organisational restructuring (officer interview). In this we can see that beatific logics, stemming from particular managerial agents (as they endeavour to dispel anxiety arising from austerity), which seek to glorify targeted, area-based interventions and pro-market working within scalar arrangements, can be subsumed by more endogenous horrific logics deriving from officers. However, whilst officers are keen to point to the role of this discourse in seeking to legitimise austerity and job losses, they are not completely against the approach in relation to their own conditions of labour. For them, the approach has also meant multi-skilling and holistic working, which they frame in a positive and beatific manner, believing it has enhanced their ability to do their jobs and achieve council priorities and, more importantly, increase their job security (officer interviews). This does suggest that these logics and their interaction with the everyday is complex, with actors reconciling multiple logics and socio-spatial relations in a mixture of resistance and acquiescence.

Such processes are obviously not without considerable conflict and tensions. Particular officers who delivered statutory planning functions did not have to reapply for their jobs as part of the restructuring, creating tensions within departments. Planning officers note a "very stressful" situation, but they legitimise this by believing that "we had to make the cuts" and whilst stressful, it reinforced their own sense of purpose within the Council because they were protected while others were made to justify their roles (officer interview). While one group of officers were deemed important, services such as regeneration and community support, often working beyond the city centre, were subject to austerity, and constituted the

one-third of redundancies that occurred in 2010. Officers who had to reapply for their jobs felt far less important to the council, and had to adjust to new responsibilities and tasks in order to remain (officer interview). Senior managers and certain officers justified redundancies as indicative of a new organisational direction, partly forced upon the council (horrific) but also proactively developed (beatific). In this account, the Council is unable to be a broad-ranging community leader and provider of services anymore, but that it can be an effective player through targeted place-based action and networked partnership working.

The virtues of 'strategic thinking' in the pursuit of economic development/regeneration are vaunted by senior managers. Such strategic thinking is said to culminate in the 'Big City Plan' that is targeted towards the scalar governance of the city, but through the targeting of individual places. Strategic thinking in such accounts is a product of austerity, but also provides succour for the remaining managers and officers who believe that they have a clear role in the organisation, by enabling the Council to influence with fewer resources (senior management interview; Powell et al, 2011). Narratives of current austerity practices typically invoke political and fantasmatic elements in which a frivolous and profligate pre-austerity period is invoked, during which it is said that economic development focused on "individual, big ticket, glossy item, but had no strategic direction of where the city was going in the future, and how to respond to that" (officer interview), and, during which the cohesive scalar governance that austerity now affords was lacking. When, at the start of austerity, the previous Director and key personnel departed, there arose, what is termed, an "opportunity" in which to deliver a more strategic approach with the introduction of a new director (officer interview).

This strategic focus, which is geared towards certain economic sites, is thus necessitated and legitimised by the recession and is now firmly embedded within pro-market thinking. As one officer notes: "We needed to be clear about what our strategy is for the future…with an element of realism about money, confidence in the market and the city" (officer interview). Managers and officers believe it is just a case of achieving all the individual projects, framed in terms of particular places, to deliver this 'bigger picture' strategy, with one officer describing this as "making me feel like I fit within the organisation" (officer interview). What we see here is the justification and celebration of austerity as a moment of enlightenment in the Council's history and a fantasy for officers, whereby strategic thinking will frame a new role for the organisation and the remaining officers, who are uniquely placed to shape the future of the city.

This logic of strategic thinking also underpins a business model of self-sustainability through selling, rather than freely providing business and planning services. This has meant the need for officers to work more towards market values and norms (e.g. entrepreneurship), in contrast to their traditional public servant roles (senior management interview). Whilst senior management presents this as a relatively seamless transition, as a way of reducing the anxiety of the radical contingency of the situation (see Glynos, 2013), officers note that working to new responsibilities and values, not experienced before, involves mediating these with civic obligations they have long worked towards and which remain an element of the general aims and culture of the council (officer interview). Further measures involve the withdrawal of financial support for business improvement districts, and the merging of services with the aim of reducing the number of employees. For senior managers these processes represent a much diminished role for the Council beyond anything other than statutory planning services, but this is offset by a more efficient and self-sustainable way of working. One senior manager

makes the point that this pro-market approach has meant that the effects of austerity have been lessened, thereby justifying an approach that actually conforms to the austerity aims of the national government (senior management interview).

Logics of pro-market practices and 'sites'

At the same time, however, and following much broader Council discourses on the 'end of local government' as a major service provider (Dudman, 2012), there is recognition of the insufficient resources in which to guide and influence market processes, working through socio-spatial relations beyond the city, particularly in influencing the inward investment being attracted to the city centre (Dakers, 2015). The concern here is that property developments are occurring without the Council being able to substantially guide their activities to ensure the distribution of employment opportunities across all sections of the City. For officers this represents an ironic situation where tasked by government to promote economic growth, they have fewer resources in which to 'steer' this process towards the benefit of the local population, and acting rather as a 'market broker', involving a logic geared towards (broader geographically configured) networks, rather than a civic leader in which there are logics focused on place and scalar governance (officer interview). Yet the consequences of such feelings is for council managers to further enact pro-market initiatives since "this recovery is delicately balanced in regional cities and still fragile in Birmingham", resulting in it enacting further austerity on itself by reducing charges for developers (e.g. 'Community Infrastructure Levy'), by up to 40 percent, to "enable development in the city" (The Planner, 2014). So that rather than feelings of impotence leading to crisis and dislocation, we see yet more affective investment in the hegemonic status of the market as a solution to economic growth, and thus the displacement of anxiety by getting more discursive investment in hegemonic tendencies.

This diminished capacity to influence does not deter the approach amongst politicians, managers and officers; rather, the tentative and uneven success of these market dynamics are drawn upon to justify the reinforcement of private sector based development (see BCC, 2014). The beatific promise of being able to achieve goals with greater efficiency and fewer resources serves further to bolster this political strategy. As with the case of Leeds (see Gonzalez and Oosterlynck, 2014), the Council has re-positioned itself as a 'civic entrepreneur', rather than the city leader it had sought to be in the past, with horrific and beatific elements interweaving: "We are rather aghast at the cuts to local authorities, particularly in high deprivation areas, and it's affecting our ability to deliver core services. On the other side of the coin, we can bring in investment to provide us with some means of ensuring in the future that jobs will be there", but where the Council has few resources for infrastructure etc. provision, since these are now the responsibility of the Local Enterprise Partnership (Bore, quoted in Dakers, 2015). In this landscape the onus is very much on partnership working with these bodies and the private sector. Public servants at the Council view their role to be one of a 'networked' strategic agent and co-ordinator, providing the long term vision and facilitating partnership working. They define their importance as critical agents in what are complex development projects, and without their role "there would be chaos" and "not a lot would happen" (officer interview). It is thus a case of the impossibility of leading the City in the face of severe funding cuts and the futility of seeking to do so, and a promise that the invisible hand of the market and partnership working with the private sector (involving networked socio-spatial relations) will be able to fill the gaps.

This beatific form translates into material actions focused on economic development priorities around place-specific growth points, such as the redevelopment of the city centre

around property development for financial services, but where economic and social deprivation is less obvious as a policy objective (Elkes, 2014). For managers this is legitimised by the much broader political 'logics of difference' coming through national bodies, such as the Local Government Association, that local government cannot do everything under the present austerity regime (LGA, 2014). This has translated into a focus on key sites, with the strongest levels of demand and growth occurring in the city centre. Here we can see fantasmatic logics of subordination to the market, that it is better to have economic development without substantial bureaucratic influence on the market, than not be attracting inward investment by damaging the pro-business image of the city. This is reflected in an organisational focus on delivering core responsibilities, such as in planning, and focusing on key areas, sites and projects that "will deliver growth", and where you can get the "get the greatest impact" (senior management interview). In such thinking the networked market takes a hegemonic position, with the role of the local scalar state being one in which to facilitate economic actors, and is also indicative of many competition-based forms of city development strategies since the 1980s (Brenner, 2004).

Critique and displacement

But justification is different to being able to reconcile these new roles beyond the senior management level, suggesting that such fantasmatic logics do not take complete hold of human actors. Officers note a general concern with a lack of resources and capacity in which to influence: "we've been stripped down to the bare minimum, to our core functions. The biggest impact was regeneration, we just don't have that, the regeneration resources and people" (officer interview). The areas teams continue to be reduced, with a further c.35% budget cut planned up to 2015-16, and with this comes concerns over the overburdening nature of economic development in a major city, as one officer notes: "There's so much for

us to do, but so little money in which to do things", while another officer suggests that: "I can only see them getting smaller, so we don't have the resources to do everything that we want to do." By contrast, senior managers regard this focus on key sites as a strategic virtue, rather than a disadvantage. The consequences are that "some areas will suffer because of this" lack of resources and need to focus on key sites (officer interview). Officers reconcile this with the view that these smaller sites will be developed but it takes longer as there is a greater reliance on developer funding.

Thus we see the emergence of a kind of 'deficit politics' within the Council, which rather than substantially critiquing austerity, centres on modes of delivery and organisation. Key to this has been the reconfiguration of centre-local government relations, which extends beyond the imposed reductions in funding allocations by national Governments, to include the discursive framing of service failings and crisis at the Council, including high profile child abuse cases and the persistent service failings of Children's Service. This has led to central government threatening to directly intervene in the Council, taking over areas such as Children's Services which has been judged as 'inadequate' (Elkes, 2013). Central government has thus been able to discursively frame a local crisis, with the Council consequently unable and unwilling to extensively critique austerity.

This is most evident in the response to the recent Kerslake Review (2014) of the Council, commissioned by central government and the Council leader in reaction to these high-profile events at the Council. The Council was accused of failing to address the disconnect between the economic development of the city centre, based largely on inward investment in the service sector economy, and the skills of the Birmingham population, particularly in deprived areas (Kerslake Review, 2014). By emphasising training and skills as an issue requiring

greater attention, this largely legitimises the present focus on financial services in the city centre by the Council. The leadership of the Council only critiqued the report for its failure to acknowledge "in large part about the good work already underway" and its embeddedness within national 'party politics', rather than the market-based interpretation of past failings and future solutions, thereby confirming and reinforcing horrific forms emphasising failings within the council (Cllr Bore, quoted in Elkes, 2014). In so doing the Kerslake Review legitimises the kinds of internal transformation that have taken place and which now guides the behaviours of managers and officers, rather than alternatives to a market-focused strategy, or highlighting the detrimental impact of austerity. We see this further in recent critiques of the progress of the council in addressing the recommendations, which are essentially situated within fantasmatic logics concerned with the need to maintain global urban competitiveness in the face of disruptive local political manoeuvring. This includes the previous Council leader, Lord Whitby, who referred to these episodes in terms of global 'brand damage': "I am saddened by the demise of the power of its brand. I worry we will end up with a name once again that is a major setback" (Smulian, 2015).

The historical construction of past and present interventions is critical in the logics underpinning new approaches. Such discourses obviously seek to produce a break with the past, but in so doing future strategies and actions need to lie beyond these discursively framed past failings. This generates the need for a language of alternatives and positivity as a way in which these issues can now be addressed, as one manager notes in response to the review: "it is important to not retreat into a defensive position", and that "alternative modes to deliver that agenda with Government" are required. Moreover, progressing means accepting the failings of the past and treating existing conditions as a positive situation, rather than as an insurmountable challenge, as one senior manager notes: "The Review allowed us to be bold

and brave enough to embrace the challenge, to be mature as a city to say we haven't got it right, but nor has Government, so we need to work collectively". At the same time, however, the complexity of the situation is still reinforced by managers, since this is critical to its fantasmatic framing as something that is to be strived for, although not necessarily possible to achieve as past efforts demonstrate. As one senior manager notes: "it is not about one particular intervention, but changing a number of things, like housing and education provision", which have "been the same for 30 years" (senior management interview).

CONCLUSION

We are presently witnessing the enactment of what Peck (2012) terms austerity urbanism, a set of processes relating to uneven neoliberal tendencies, which has the potential to deepen urban crisis. While accounts such as Peck (2012) have gone some way to explaining austerity tendencies there are particular conceptual elements that can be utilised in further understanding these processes. In this paper we have presented a conceptual framework for examining urban austerity by way of an emphasis on post-structuralist discourse theory, but through the logics approach of Glynos and Howarth (2007). At the core of the framework is a political discourse theoretical framework for understanding political rhetoric, practices and subjectivity within the context of broader regimes of practice, making it possible to examine the unevenly contested practices of austerity. This is achieved by analysing the intersection of logics and subjectivities at work. In so doing the approach moves beyond accounts such as Donald et al (2014), with their focus on relatively homogeneous austerity regimes, to explore complex and interwoven practices occurring at the macro, meso and micro (subject) levels, and recognising the radical contingency of social order.

This is not to suggest, however, an unproblematic approach. At the core of post-structural discourse theory is an understanding that meaning is constantly constructed within a discursive field, yet there is scope for further conceptual advancement. This is most notable in terms of developing greater sensitivity towards the moral and ethical judgements that constitute 'regimes of practice', and which are deployed by actors through political logics in relation to such meaning construction (Boltanski, 2011; Fuller, 2013). Further utilising this approach in understanding austerity urbanism does suggest, therefore, a far greater focus on the: (1) practices of justifications and agreement setting enacted by key decision-makers through restorative political and fantasmatic logics; (2) emergence of critique by actors within and beyond governing agents, and involving the insertion of logics of significance into hegemonic discursive realms; (3) form taken by critiques, including how they relate to broader societal logics and the intrusion of the real into symbolic orders; (4) why and how critique does not emerge and is displaced through fantasmatic logics and thus into other forms of expression, such as acceptance and cynicism; (5) and the extent to which dominant actors are able to ensure the restoration of existing social logics through political practices, and how other subjects are marginalised.

The latter research avenues are of critical importance as they bring to the fore the question of why austerity has been the object of public contestation, on the one hand, but embraced in local managerial practices, on the other, without provoking, on the face of it, a serious 'legitimation crisis' (Habermas, 1975). Similarly, the preceding research areas facilitate an analysis geared towards understanding how 'crisis talk' underpins the political strategies and practices of those seeking to subordinate or resist (Fuller, 2010; Boin et al, 2009). Ultimately, this conceptual framework builds upon and extends the recent arguments of

scholars such as Newman (2013), with their recognition of the uneven, emergent, assembled and contested nature of state strategies and practices. Through the deployment of the logics approach, and geared towards the issues highlighted above, it is possible to examine the intricacies, dynamism and incompleteness of what have recently been termed 'austerity regimes' (Donald et al, 2014).

There are further important questions on the extent to which austerity is interwoven with contemporary variegated neoliberal tendencies (see Peck, 2013; Alistair et al, 2013). Such questions relate to how neoliberal regulatory institutions, ideologies and practices (which impact on urban areas), are (re)formulated and seek to acquire a hegemonic position. For Peck et al (2013), following Hilgers (2011), neoliberal tendencies and hegemony takes place through historical conjunctures, suggesting the contingent role of institutionalised practices. Such tendencies and hegemony also occur across these conjunctures, indicating that the analysis of relational interaction and negotiation is critical (Peck and Theodore, 2012). The approach presented in this paper is sensitive to such considerations given the focus on historically constituted dynamic configurations of social logics, and how such logics are subject to constant change and reconfiguration through political and fantasmatic logics. Engaging with post-structural discourse theory therefore offers insights into the significant potential to advance our understanding of the political and emotive relational underpinnings of variegated neoliberal urban tendencies.

Finally, there are obvious connotation for bureaucrats and local politicians in resisting austerity. The logics approach suggests they should construct political logics that directly critique austerity and construct alternate urban futures (e.g. 'Kilburn Manifesto'), based on an 'epistemological function' that draws on discursive formations that oppose neoliberal

principles and values, such as those stemming from Keynesianism, with a future based on a more egalitarian social contract, thus working through a 'logic of equivalence' that engages alternative political projects (Worth, 2013). A critical element is to expose the lack of evidence for austerity producing positive social and economic outcomes, and thereby 'debunking' fantasmatic logics (see Blyth, 2013). Ultimately, the presentation of alternatives does require fantasmatic logics which convey a 'beatific' strategic vision that reduces anxiety (of the unknown) by reassuring actors of the validity and viability of such alternatives, often from drawing upon local examples of action that produce greater social equalities and progress (see, for example, NEF, 2015).

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